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THE LIBERAL ARTS--PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE.

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THE STERILITY OF THE LIBERAL ARTS IN MOST COLLEGES TODAY IS BECOMING MORE EVIDENT. STUDENTS ARE TURNING TO "POT," LSD, OR IMMERSIONS IN ANOTHER CULTURE IN THEIR QUESTS TO EXPAND THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS. THE STUDENT'S NEED FOR A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS AND LARGER FRAME OF REFERENCE CAN BE FULFILLED BY A STUDY OF THE LIBERAL ARTS ONLY IF THESE STUDIES ARE LESS DOGMATICALLY CONCEIVED AND MORE IMAGINATIVELY AND CREATIVELY PRESENTED. TO IMPROVE THE LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULUM WE MUST RE-EDUCATE TEACHERS, MAKE THE CURRICULUM MORE FLEXIBLE AND RELEVANT, AND CHANGE THE COURSES TO EMPHASIZE METHODS OF INQUIRY, THE NON-VERBAL, AND THE CONTEMPORARY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "CASC NEWSLETTER," VOLUME 11, NUMBER 10, JULY 1967, PAGES 3-5, 13. (BN)

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An academic vice president explores the potential of the liberal arts in the twentieth century.

The Liberal Arts: Past, Present, Future

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JAMES G. RICE

When the liberal arts were first created, they were new, imaginative, and exciting ways of dealing with the questions man was then asking about the universe as he knew it and about his place in it. They were not static blocks of knowledge. To say that they were at that time relevant is an understatement; they were the very symbolizations of living experience. They were tools for breaking the shackles of tradition. They were systems for dealing with more of reality than could be caught conceptually in the folk nets of old. They were revolutionary ways of resisting the rigidities of institutions.

People in later generations, confronted with the same questions, found in the liberal arts a means of coping with their own perplexities. The more creative of them improvised on, modified, and adapted the earlier liberal arts to a new time and new needs, to an expanded view of man and the universe. The history of the liberal arts is, therefore, the history of man's intellectual and cultural growth and of his search for ways to symbolize this. It is the history of man's humanization.

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And then something happened—printing, the inexpensive, easily reproduced book. From that time to the present, those devoting themselves to helping children become men have become so preoccupied with reading, explicating, and footnoting all that has been thought before, that—far from being liberating, far from being arts—these exciting, imaginative quests and reflections, the liberal arts, have become capitalized—The Liberal Arts. They have become authorities and blocks of stuff to be memorized, mastered, and recited. For questing, there has been substituted the lecture, the predigested verity, the logic game—so that finally all has been turned into a system.

One does not need to be convinced of the sterility of the liberal arts in most colleges today. Our game has caught up with us. Beginning with the birth of Christ, it is estimated that the first doubling of knowledge occurred in 1715, the second in 1900, the third in 1950, and the fourth in 1960. This, rather neatly and mathematically interpreted, means that if you left school in 1950, in 1960 you knew exactly one-half as much as you should have known.

For a time the only solution we could see was careful selecting from the past for an overview. The survey of English literature course, still almost the standard course in colleges, is a relic from this period. No course was ever

better calculated to drive students from the appreciation of literature.

Then there was a daring revolution—selection for relevance, the great ideas, the great books, the packaged compendium of all that is pertinent from the past. The development of these courses was undoubtedly an exciting experience to the teachers who put them together and faced the many possibilities and choices to be made. To the students, they were just so many blocks of material to be memorized.

Reaction Against the Liberal Arts

As generations of students plowed their way through these various cleverly organized mazes, it became clear that they did not find such courses involving and relevant quests. The thirst for adventure, the need to follow a road unexplored, was not being met. Students began to avoid the liberal arts when possible and to move instead into areas where the edges of knowledge were still being pushed—into the applied arts, the new sciences. It is unhappiness with the liberal arts in the established universities which accounts for the free university movement. It accounts, too, for the "study-abroad" fad and for the underground art movement.

Not only are the liberal arts as presently taught being rejected as irrelevant, but also we are beginning to know something about knowledge and about the human being as a knower. Studies now tell us, for example, that students forget one-half of the facts learned in a course one year after completing it. In three years, they have forgotten four-fifths of the course. We are further told that concepts, principles, and methods of inquiry have a longer life and styles of learning an even greater life-span in the learner. We are beginning to see that it is the liberal arts tradition of questing which must be preserved, not the totality of the consequences of these quests.

4 Our task as educators thus becomes one not simply of helping students know what is known but of helping them become learners themselves—autonomous, self-initiating, and self-propelling. If we fail in this, we have failed indeed; we have not only wasted their time and our time, but we have crippled them for the remainder of their lives. We have burdened them with information likely to become misinformation and saddled them with a misconception of what being educated means, indeed, with what being human means. We have sown the seeds for early intellectual obsolescence and condemned them to retirement as spectators in the onrushing times of their lives.

Liberation

Whatever other claims may be made for the liberal arts, one that is persistent over the years is that of liberation—intellectual emancipation. What is sought is liberation from the provincialisms of one's own place; liberation from the perspectives of one's own time; from one's own conditioned, perceptual systems; from one's own categories and dogmatisms; and sometimes from the limited conceptualizing potentialities of one's own language. Such a liberation may be delineated in a number of ways. It is the ability to see one's self, one's place, and one's time in perspective. It is having a variety of alternatives as part of one's intellectual repertoire of approaches and methodologies. It is the capacity to choose. It is the achieving of self-knowledge, self-consciousness, and self-awareness of the ways in which one is unique. Various subject matters have been selected to achieve this freedom and various languages and metaphors called upon to describe it. However, unless I read the history of education amiss, the goal of liberation marks the continuity and the common foundation upon which pedagogical methodologies and philosophies of liberal education and curriculum development have been based.

One can thus account for one of the more recent and curiously popular phenomena on the liberal arts campus—living and studying abroad. This experience is one which students increasingly appear to demand as they shop for a college, and market-minded college boards and administrators have moved to meet the demand, to give the customer what he wants. The justification for such programs most often advanced is that "the American undergraduate, raised in an increasingly homogeneous environment, will benefit from being confronted with an environment wholly different from his own." It is recognized that "considerable cultural shock can result from the sudden awareness that many of the values which one has accepted as self-evident are either questioned, rejected, or indeed derided in cultures with their own histories and their own problems." Nonetheless, such cultural shock "is recommended not because of the desire to bring into question the social values on which the American community depends but, rather, to encourage in the student the awareness that those values, while they serve the indispensable function of cementing the society, are not necessarily unique in their ability to perform that function. That is, the sensitive student can discover for himself that cultural values vary according to the alternatives left open by a nation's past for dealing with its current problems and that this is true of his own nation as it is of others."[1]

I cite these articulated objectives of study abroad beside the objective of the liberal arts to highlight my thesis that the central and most pervasive objective of the liberal arts program is helping the student outgrow his provincialisms—personal, geographic, ideological, and temporal. The avidity and enthusiasm with which students enter into study-abroad programs belie the statement that students are not eager for and avoid the genuine liberal arts experience. It points up, too, the obvious fact that it is we who pervert the liberal arts through neglect of their role in

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[1] K. Robert Nilsson. "Establishing a Program for Studying Abroad." **AAUP Bulletin.** December 1966. p. 428.

undergraduate education (or the spurious insertion of some other role) who have made the liberal arts in many colleges a bore—irrelevant to the yearning, wistful reach of the student.

"Psychedelic" is a word that has recently found a place in our language. Meaning simply "consciousness-expanding," it is currently used in discussing the agents and conditions necessary for broadening and heightening one's awareness and expanding one's consciousness. These agents are, of course, LSD, other lysergics, amatoids, and marijuana. That chemically produced psychedelic experiences are so recklessly, indiscriminantly, and defiantly sought by our young people is without question one of the tragedies of our time.

The claims made for the liberal arts, travel abroad, and the LSD experience are identical. All purport to put the student in touch with dimensions of the humanness he has been taught to experience as "other." All claim to heighten his awareness, expand his consciousness, and provide him with some larger frame of reference within which he can sense his uniqueness and the range of potentialities available to him as the product of centuries and centuries of internal history.

That students in our time have been forced to find the places for exercising and stretching their sensibilities in LSD or "pot" sessions or in immersion in another culture implies many things. I wish to stress two here: (1) The urge, the need, and the instinctive search exist in the student. (2) The liberal arts less dogmatically conceived, that is, more openly conceived and imaginatively and creatively presented—please note that I did not say "taught"—can meet that need. It would, indeed, be ironic if history, in passing out judgments on our time, should conclude that it was our failure to see the liberal arts for what they are and our failure to deal with them in our classrooms for their psychedelic potential which contributed to our young seeking inner illumination and confirmation of their myriad sensibilities in risky, dangerous, and bizarre ways. [At the time I made these statements I had misgivings about posturing as a prophet. A few weeks later, however, an Associated Press story quoted Sidney M. Jourard, president of The American Association of Humanistic Psychology, as saying that "young persons turn to marijuana and LSD because they can't find teachers who can disclose to them the wonder of life. . . . An education requires teachers, not trainers. Teachers are hard to find. They are scarce as dodo birds. Teachers illuminate what is; they are existential explorers, groping for new meanings as they challenge old ones."]

The Psychedelic Mission

Can the liberal arts be restored to their centrality in the cultivation of our humanness? The small college has traditionally been the stronghold of liberal education. If it is to maintain that role, and I believe it must, it must be prepared to reassert with integrity what I believe to be the central strand of its history, a strand which I shall here call its psychedelic mission. Assertion, however, is not enough. It must be prepared to change. Indeed, if the liberal arts college does not learn to manage change, it will be managed *by* change. Students will continue to seek outside the college that which is culturally and personally relevant and to avoid the irrelevant and impersonal within the college.

Here, then, are a number of things which must be done, and done quickly and courageously, if the liberal arts are to remain vital and true to their psychedelic mission.

1. **Courses in the liberal arts must be changed.** Tinkering with them, patching them, altering the text, is not enough. They must be *changed* to emphasize inquiry, process, search; to expose inductive principles, structures.

2. **Teachers must be led to entertain the possibility that much of their stock-in-trade may have become irrelevant to the culture.** They must be urged to become familiar with the modern and contemporary liberal arts, those which matter to students and which carry on the tradition of the liberal arts as surely as *Paradise Lost*.

3. **Flexibility must be introduced into the curriculum.** Now that we know there is no sacrosanct vehicle for achieving liberation, students can and should be provided with a variety of choices. To place the student in a position of choosing is to make him an instrument in his own education. It is to destroy completely the concept of education he has developed in the grade school and high school—as something done to him—and to replace it with a sense of education as something which he does for himself. Opportunities must be provided for independent study if he is expected to attain any autonomy as a learner. Further, the college should consider seriously the granting of credit for experience outside the formal course structure —for apprenticeship experiences, Peace Corps activity, work in the poverty program, VISTA, and the Teacher Corps.

4. **A place must be found in the liberal arts curriculum for the nonverbal.** It is not irrelevant to note that one of the courses introduced by students in the free university at San Francisco State College was entitled, "A Non-Verbal Seminar." There has been a shift in our time from an exclusively linguistically oriented culture to a symbolically oriented one. Related to this is the shift from an unquestioning trust in the rational and classical logic to a recognition of man's other human qualities. Evidence of this shift is found in the vast literature on creativity and in the acknowledgement by more and more scientists that the early stages of their work are basically intuitional and do not conform to the folk myth of the scientist as objectively applying empirical methodology to a problem and arriving step-by-patient step at an answer. Although the

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curricular and pedagogical implications of this shift in orientation are only beginning to be explored, it is clear that the next few years will see the emergence of approaches congruent with this cultural change. Hopefully, the small college will in this endeavor, as in others, find itself in a position of leadership.

5. **There is a shift in our culture, too, from confidence in the parochial western tradition and an exclusive preoccupation with it.** To keep abreast of this shift, the college must modify the chauvinistic, even national, treatment of western civilization. It is becoming increasingly provincial to think of a liberal undergraduate education as dealing exclusively with western culture. I am carefully avoiding the phrase "intercultural studies" as I do not see this problem being met realistically by the introduction of courses in the various cultures resulting in new specialisms or by the development of courses in aspects of nonwestern cultures. Nor do I see the inclusion of exotic aspects of other cultures "for comparison" in certain courses as contributing significantly to charismatic participation in the family of man and world citizenship. Nor am I convinced that "study abroad" even when aimed at "intercultural confrontation" achieves this larger fundamental perspective and sensitivity. What I do see as requisite is a new attempt to introduce the student to western civilization. Somehow we must transcend ethnocentricity in a framework which deals with western and nonwestern materials phenomenologically. This means an emphasis on similarity of human dynamics and an avoidance, insofar as possible, of either indoctrination or apology for their manifestation in our own culture.

6. **A place must be found in the curriculum for the contemporary, not because the productions are, or will be, great, but because they are relevant to the student.** More importantly, they provide the opportunity for seeing how "a revolution in the modes of experiencing and expressing experience has occurred," and, one must add, is continuously occurring.[2]

The situation is, then, not without opportunities for the courageous. On the contrary, they press upon us. Nonetheless, they do require a leap from conventional thinking about the Liberal Arts. Anatole Rapoport has observed that "dilemmas are never resolved in the conceptual framework in which they arise, but only by a leap into another conceptual framework."[3] In leaping there is risk, but I, for one, believe the odds are with us.

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[2] Daniel Bell. **The Reforming of General Education.** New York: Columbia University Press, 1966. p. 232.

[3] Anatole Rapoport. "Cultural Evolution as Viewed by Psychologists." **Daedalus.** December 1961. p. 581.

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CASC was founded in 1956 to provide small colleges with a means of achieving various goals collectively which they could not achieve individually. These goals include regional accreditation, expansion of enrollment, and raising academic standards. The Council serves its members as a group in five basic areas: research, coordination, public relations, fund raising, and government relations. The CASC members are four-year, non-tax-supported, nonprofit institutions with an emphasis on the liberal arts and sciences.

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